

Title: **Five ways Branstad changed Iowa forever**

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## ON POLITICS

### Five ways Branstad changed Iowa forever

asked Gov. Terry Branstad, who on Monday becomes the longest-serving governor in the nation, to describe how his historic tenure as governor has changed Iowa.

His answer was too long (as critics would say his governorship has been) but here are some highlights:

“Well, remember, I came in with the farm crisis in the ‘80s and Iowa has changed pretty dramatically since that time.

We’ve become much more diversified,” he said, pointing to the growth of the renewable fuel industry.

“Agriculture has changed dramatically,” he added, referring to tech-driven farming techniques and conservation practices.

“In terms of economic development, one of my top priorities, insurance and financial services have grown dramatically,” Branstad said.

He had more “dramat-

ic” comments, but you get the picture. I’m poking fun just a little bit here, but don’t get me wrong.

Branstad has already left an indelible footprint on the landscape of Iowa, even if he does nothing else before he leaves office. If he ever does.

Some Branstad accomplishments, such as his tax-cutting records, may take only one

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more governor to undo. Others, however, have already stood the test of time. Here are just five of those.

**Gubernatorial power and expectations:** While some executive power comes from his longevity, Branstad has also increased his own authority in ways that future governors can duplicate.

For example, Branstad has tested the boundaries of

his item veto authority many times over the years, as well as his ability to spend or withhold money in ways legislators did not approve. He’s won some and lost some when opponents have fought him in court.

Sometimes, even when he’s lost, he’s won. A prime example was the closing of 36 Iowa Workforce Development offices in 2011. The Iowa Supreme Court ruled against his use of the item veto, but the offices re-

mained closed.

Branstad has also successfully circumvented the Legislature with his decision to close two of the four state mental health institutions, and he’s likely to prevail with this year’s move to privatize case management for Medicaid. These have all been controversial decisions. A new governor can reverse them, but the ability to use similar tactics will be part of Branstad’s legacy.

Political scientist Chris

Larimer of University of Northern Iowa, who has studied and written about gubernatorial power in Iowa, says Branstad’s impact extends beyond the institutional authority of the office. The way he has conducted himself in office — traveling to all 99 counties every year, meeting with all significant interest groups whether they support him or not — have shaped Iowans’ view of what a governor should do, Larimer said.

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"I think he's changed what voters expect from the office of the governor. So if the next person who comes into the office doesn't do those things, I think he or she would be punished for that," Larimer said. Democrat Chet Culver, who lost re-election to Branstad in 2010, learned that lesson the hard way. The next governor doesn't have to grow a mustache, but the full Grassley is likely here to stay.

**Economic development:** Branstad outlined this in his own comments and several other Register writers have described his accomplishments in detail. It's hard to imagine another governor matching Branstad's zeal for smokestack chasing. Projects like Orascom's Iowa Fertilizer plant in Lee County might not fly if the next governor pulls back on government subsidies for business. Iowa remains a relatively low-wage state.

Even so, Branstad's efforts toward diversifying the agriculture-based economy are integral to his legacy and largely positive for Iowa. His work in encouraging growth of the insurance and financial services industries and helping pave the way for renewable fuels production have helped Iowa weather the ebb and flow of ag commodity prices.

**Gambling:** Branstad was a reluctant abettor, if you will, in creating Iowa's gaming industry. After twice vetoing a state lottery, Branstad approved it in 1985 and

now presides over a state with a billion-dollar-plus, regulated casino industry.

Branstad's insistence on tight oversight and regulation and the lack of major scandals have helped gain widespread public confidence and support. The prospect of further gaming expansion, such as regulated online casino games and video lottery, are just a matter of time. Most Iowans say gambling has been good for the state, despite negative side effects such as gambling addiction and reports of harm to other community entertainment businesses.

Branstad may have thought the lottery was a risky proposition, but now Iowa is all-in on gambling and that's not likely to change.

**Fiscal reforms:** Branstad was so honked off about the decline of Iowa's financial condition during the recession of 2008 and 2009 that he came out of political retirement to run again for governor. He clobbered Chet Culver after a campaign largely accusing the one-term Democrat of fiscal mismanagement.

And yet on election night in November 2010, Iowa had one of the lowest unemployment and per-capita debt levels in the nation and one of the highest bond ratings. The state budget had a \$700 million surplus, revenues were growing and Culver had not raised income or sales taxes.

The fiscal reforms that

Branstad bargained in exchange for signing the largest sales tax increase in state history kept the state out of serious financial trouble even after he left office the first time. Branstad's focus on closing budget loopholes and creating and maintaining a "rainy-day" fund have raised Iowans' expectations that the state can weather economic downturns without serious disruption in state services.

Branstad has tried other budget reforms, such as biannual budgeting, without much cooperation from the legislature. Look for him to try other ways to cement fiscal controls in place before he leaves office again.

**Education:** Next to economic development, Iowa's schools have been Branstad's consistent priority, with a mixed report card. Iowa is still considered one of the best-educated states in the nation in terms of its share of people with high-school diplomas. But other states have

moved ahead of Iowa in terms of student achievement, and teacher pay is below the national average.

After failing to enact major education reforms before he left office the first time, Branstad made it the mission of his new gubernatorial tenure to overhaul K-12 education. The Department of Education announced last week that all but 40 school districts are now participating in the teacher leadership compensation program,

which dilutes the dominance of seniority in setting teacher salaries and pay increases.

Ultimately, however, the Branstad years were marked most indelibly by the hollowing out and wholesale consolidation of rural school districts. Branstad didn't cause this trend and he tried to alleviate it in some ways, such as building the fiber-optic Iowa Communications Network to facilitate distance learning. The fact is, though, he maintained a school funding formula that largely directed state dollars to where the students were — and increasingly, that was not in rural Iowa. His veto earlier this year of over \$55 million for public schools was seen by some educators as a way to accelerate rural consolidation.

"I think, yeah, it's absolutely fair to say this is a legacy of a governor and certainly a governor who served for so long over this time of changing demographics," political science professor David Redlawsk said. Redlawsk, formerly of the University of Iowa, now works at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Branstad doesn't talk much about legacies, but it's not necessary. Even if he painted a mustache on the Capitol dome, it would be hard to make his tenure more memorable than it is already. He deserves congratulations for making the history books as longest-serving governor, but his place in Iowa history was already secure.



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